

 **Here to help**



British Gas told to step up its maintenance

As you may know already, we've received numerous complaints about the British Gas Homecare

scheme recently (see March, p6).

Homecare is supposed to offer 'fast, affordable relief from the misery of boiler breakdowns'.

But when Michael White's boiler packed up in the middle of winter, relief was far from fast.

Michael took out his Homecare contract in 2000, when the boiler was put in at his Hertfordshire home.

Each month he paid £19 for the policy, safe in the knowledge that if his boiler packed up help was just a phone call away. So when his boiler stopped working last December, Michael counted on a quick fix, particularly as he has cancer and needs to keep warm.

But despite numerous visits from British Gas, it failed to fix the problem. Meanwhile, Michael tried to keep warm with fan heaters supplied free of charge by British Gas, but he used so much electricity that his power supplier rang to check if there was a problem. After the boiler had been out of service for more than ten weeks, Michael called us, and we told the company to sort out the problem promptly.

The boiler was then fixed within days. British Gas blamed the delay on getting hold of a part made to order, and it pointed out that it provided the heaters straight away.

But Michael said: 'British Gas ruined my health. The whole boiler issue made my life unbearable.'

When we asked, British Gas said it wouldn't give compensation as it had previously advised Michael he may suffer delays if new parts were needed and had suggested that he replace his boiler.

Medical tourists stretch the NHS

HEALTHCARE

People are being urged to consider the full consequences of going overseas for private treatment, as returning patients are stretching NHS resources.

Doctors' concerns echo our survey (see 'Sun, sea and scalpel', p30) of almost 300 patients, of whom 8 per cent had to use the NHS in an emergency after treatment abroad and a further 22 per cent required other follow-up NHS care.

Our expert, orthopaedic consultant Stephen Cannon, said: 'Unprepared patients may find themselves on NHS waiting lists for vital physiotherapy or seeing a doctor who's reluctant to follow up unknown work.'

In the past year, two studies have highlighted such problems. In one survey of 35 plastic surgeons, more than half had treated patients with complications after treatment abroad. More than half of those were emergency cases, and two thirds of all people treated needed hospital stays. One woman required three operations after a tummy tuck and liposuction in Tunisia.

The survey's author, consultant plastic surgeon Jeremy Birch, said many complications happen to people after they fly home and, if they don't plan aftercare, they struggle to get help.

He said: 'For example, a breast implant



Jeremy says NHS follow-up work might be difficult in the UK

One woman required three follow-up operations

might be removed on the NHS if it's urgent but not replaced, leaving the patient struggling to get the overseas company to help or to pay for more treatment here.'

In another study, the Irish Dental Association found that of 26 overseas patients who subsequently visited an Irish dental hospital, 16 needed 'extensive retreatment' and others needed remedial work. Dental professor Brian O'Connell said: 'Correcting treatment often takes longer than the original work.'

TAKE ACTION!

■ If you do opt for overseas treatment, speak to UK clinicians, budget for aftercare and don't fly home too soon. Visit www.which.co.uk/cosmetic for tips on cosmetic treatments.

Which? victory over Nutella advert

KIDS' FOOD

An advert promoting Nutella chocolate spread as part of a balanced children's breakfast has been pulled from TV screens following a complaint by Which?.

The advert aimed at parents trying to provide a good diet for their children described Nutella as being part of a balanced breakfast. It claimed that each jar 'contains 52 hazelnuts, the equivalent of a glass of skimmed milk and some cocoa'. But it failed to mention that the spread is high in sugar and fat.

We complained to the Advertising

Standards Authority (ASA), which agreed the advert was misleading and said it shouldn't be repeated.

Which? food and health campaigner, Miranda Watson, said: 'We think it is highly irresponsible of Nutella to imply that its spread is healthier than it actually is, especially as the advert clearly encourages parents to give it to their children for breakfast.'

'You would have to eat a whole jar just to get the claimed "equivalent of a glass of skimmed milk". That would also mean consuming over 100g of sugar, even from the smallest jar of Nutella.'



TAKE ACTION!

■ If you're unhappy with an unhealthy food advert that's targeting your kids go to www.which.co.uk/kidsfood to let us know.

Patients with superbug to get greater chance of compensation

MRSA money due

IMPATIENT FOR CHANGE

Victims of MRSA are more likely to win compensation once superbug screening is introduced, Which? has been told.

The bacterium affects thousands each year and leaves many disabled, but patients battle to prove that their hospital was to blame, with health chiefs arguing they were already carrying the bug.

In a bid to curb the epidemic of infections, the government has told hospitals to screen patients

before they come in for planned surgery from next year. Emergency admissions could be screened within three years.

Patients will have a swab taken from their nose. Those carrying the bug, which is harmless in healthy people, will be treated in isolation. Patients given the all clear who then catch the bug will have a better chance of proving it was the hospital's fault.

Clinical negligence lawyer Stephen Webber told us: 'If you had a clear swab before going in, it would definitely make it easier to make a successful claim.'

His comments come as 71-year-old Elizabeth Miller awaits a court judgment to see if she can sue the NHS for £30,000. Patients normally sue over a hospital's failure to treat the bug, but her legal team argues that a swab taken before her operation shows that the hospital gave her MRSA.

Screening scrutiny

But MRSA experts question the worth of swabbing, arguing that the bug is already in hospitals rather than brought in from outside and



that there aren't sufficient facilities for treating those who test positive.

Dr Mark Enright, of Imperial College London, said: 'Screening everyone won't make a difference unless isolation wards are available.'

He added that the nationwide hospital deep-clean programme, due to end this month, was pointless: 'What's needed is routine cleaning all the time rather than once a year.'



TAKE ACTION!

Chief Medical Officer Prof Sir Liam Donaldson advises taking alcohol hand rub into hospital and, if in doubt, asking your health professional to use it before touching you.

In brief

AIRLINE REFUNDS

If you bought a ticket on British Airways or Virgin Atlantic between 11 August 2004 and 23 March 2006 you may be entitled to a refund of up to £20. They've admitted to fixing the price of fuel surcharges on flights of more than seven hours from the UK. See www.airpassengerrefund.co.uk for details of how to claim.



BT CHARGE CHANGES

BT has scrapped landline charges for its helpdesk and customer service numbers. Its chargeable helplines, which currently start with 0845 or 0870, have been changed to begin with a free 0800 or 0808 prefix. However, among other tariff changes, BT is also hiking up the cost of evening calls for some customers. We want companies to drop 0870 numbers and use the cheaper 03 or 0800 prefix.

FREE BUS TRAVEL

If you're aged 60 or over and live in England, you can claim free off-peak local bus travel from 1 April. This also applies to eligible disabled people. Go to www.direct.gov.uk/buspass for details of how to register.



BEAT HARD-SELL TACTICS

Consumers have more protection against hard-sell tactics under a new European directive. Which? lobbied to ensure the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive improved your rights; for example, businesses that mislead or use aggressive selling risk a fine or could face prison. We'll monitor enforcement of the new rules.

SHOPPING GUIDE

Don't forget, our *Buying Guide* listing all Best Buys with prices and ratings is now available online – at www.which.co.uk/onlineguide – and will be updated next on 1 April.



The way we were

25 years ago, April 1983

What is the difference between cheap and expensive shampoo? We asked 165 men and women to wash their hair with products of varying prices. Testers preferred many cheaper ones.

We said expensive shampoo was likely to be pricier due to perfume and other additives rather than the detergent that actually washes hair.



50 years ago, summer 1958

Is cheaper inferior? We asked this as discounted goods were becoming common in the late 1950s. We said: 'Some of us tend to be suspicious of cut-price goods and cut-price shops, half expecting sand in the coffee and something odd about the jam.'

We found wide differences in the prices of same-brand goods, including Hartley's gooseberry jam.